DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 577 PS 014 075

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TITLE Playful Literacy Activities and Learning: Preliminary Observations.
PUB DATE Jun 83
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Play and Play Environments (Austin, TX, June 30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Master Theses (042) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Learning Experience; *Literacy; *Play; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Pretend Play; Reading Readiness; Social Behavior; Writing Readiness

ABSTRACT

A week-long exploratory observational case study of two white middle class girls (4 years, 9 months of age) investigated how children incorporate reading and writing literacy skills and knowledge of literacy artifacts into their play activities. Also examined was the role these play activities have in the development of literacy. Data were collected through focused nonparticipant observations of children's preschool activities, parent observations, and informal discussions. Results indicated that each girl engaged in playful literacy activities in both pretend and nonpretend contexts. When new information about literacy artifacts was presented, the girls gradually incorporated parts of that information into their play. This new information was eventually consolidated into larger units of play behavior and then repeated several times. When play concerned familiar or known information, subjects voluntarily elaborated and extended that information into new contexts. Whether or not the girls incorporated new information or elaborated on known information seemed to be related to the saliency of the information and their current level of skill development. Preliminary data raised questions about the role of play in children's learning of literacy. (Author/BJD)

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ED238577

PLAYFUL LITERACY ACTIVITIES AND LEARNING:

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Paper presented at the

International Conference on Play and Play Environments

Austin, Texas

June 30, 1983

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PS 014075

Abstract

This exploratory observational case study of two, white, middle class girls (4 years, 9 months) investigated how children incorporated literacy skills and knowledge of literacy artifacts into their play activities and examined the role of these activities in learning literacy. Data were collected through focused non-participant observations of children's preschool activities, parent observations, and informal discussions. Results indicate that each girl engaged in playful literacy activities in both pretend and non-pretend contexts. When new information about literacy artifacts was presented, there was gradual incorporation of parts of that information into their play. This new information was eventually consolidated into larger units of play behavior and then repeated several times. When playing with familiar or known information, there was voluntary elaboration of that information that was extended into new contexts. Whether or not the girls incorporated new information or elaborated on known information seemed to be related to the saliency of the information and their current level of skill development. These preliminary data raise questions about the role of play in children's learning of literacy.

There is a growing body of theory and research that suggests that play contributes to children's learning. Piaget (1962) discusses play as assimilation, the driving force behind learning and Vygotsky (1976) theorizes that play is foundational to later abstract thought. Other researchers (S. Miller, 1973; Sylva, Bruner, and Genova, 1976) view play as a particularly productive context for learning because the dominance of means over ends results in voluntary elaboration and complication of the means, the consequences of failure are reduced, it affords a temporary moratorium on frustration, and it is voluntary.

Some researchers (Calkins, 1980, Clay, 1975) have commented that children's early reading and writing efforts often resemble play. Jacob (1982b) found that Puerto Rican kindergarten children engaged in literacy activities during play at home and that many of these activities were playful. However, little is known about the characteristics of playful literacy activities or about their contribution to literacy development.

Literacy, treated here as the ability to read and write, is a complex construct. It involves motor skills, cognitive skills, knowledge of literacy artifacts and social behaviors appropriate for specific uses of literacy (Gibson and Levin, 1975; Mason, 1981; Scribner and Cole, 1981).

In view of the limited research on the role of playful literacy activities and their role in learning literacy, we conducted exploratory case studies to refine methods and answer the following questions. What are the nature and characteristics of preschool children's playful literacy activities? What functions do these activities serve in learning literacy?

Method

To answer our research questions we chose to use a case study research design and collect qualitative, naturalistic observations. This approach allowed us to systematically and inductively identify patterns of behavior and variables related to these patterns.

We report here on case studies of two white, middle class girls (4 years 9 months) from a preschool in Northern Virginia. These girls were selected because they were native English speakers, did not exhibit any developmental problems, and were of the same age and social class.

Early in January, 1983, we conducted general observations at the preschool to familiarize ourselves with the school program and allow the children and project staff to become adapted to our presence. We also met with the mothers of the children to explain their role in the study.

During one week in January, 1983, we conducted focused, non-participant observations of the children's activities at the preschool (approximately eight hours per child.) Each of the investigators observed one child and produced observational notes and audio tape recordings of their behavior. We also photographed literacy artifacts the children made or used. (See Jacob 1982a for a detailed description of the procedures followed.) After conducting the observations we expanded our observational notes, transcribed the audio tapes, and combined these data to produce narrative descriptions of each child's activities at school.

In these narrative records we identified all instances of the children's playful reading and writing activities. We defined playful behavior as that which is pleasurable, has no extrinsic goals, is

spontaneous and voluntary, and involves some active engagement on the part of the player (Garvey, 1977.) We further distinguished the playful literacy activities occurring in pretend and non-pretend contexts. Pretend contexts are those in which children transform themselves or an object into another object, person, event or situation through the use of motor or verbal actions in a make-believe activity (Curry and Arnaud, 1974). Non-pretend contexts do not involve such transformations.

During the week of our focused observations the girls' mothers recorded their daily observations of the girls' activities at home. This record included an overview of the day and descriptions of the girls' play and literacy activities. These data were transcribed, and playful literacy behaviors were identified using the procedures followed in the preschool observations.

After the observations had been completed, the director of the preschool, a person with whom the girls were very familiar, met individually with each girl. She informally talked with them to assess their ability to recognize the names of the children in the class and their familiarity with and knowledge of characteristics and uses of prescriptions. The data from these discussions were also transcribed.

Results

Both the school and home environments of the children were saturated with print. In the classroom, activity areas and objects were labelled, experience charts were written, and books were available in a book corner. In the homes, books, magazines and newspapers were present; moreover, both girls had their own books and magazines. Reading and

writing were highly valued by the parents and staff. The school day included story time and quiet reading period. Parents frequently read to their children and supported the children's literacy efforts.

A major goal of the preschool observed was to promote learning through play. The school day included a large block of time for free play during which children chose their own activities. The housekeeping area often was arranged to stimulate pretend play on different themes for a week at a time.

Both girls engaged in playful literacy activities at home and in school. The playful literacy activities that occurred in pretend play contexts at school occurred on one day when the girls played veternarians and used pretend prescriptions; Toni played for about 25 minutes and Kelly played for about 65 minutes. The girls also did several playful literacy activities while pretending at home. For example, Kelly pretended to read a menu while playing restaurant. Playful literacy activities that occurred in non-pretend contexts occurred more often and were shorter than those occuring during pretend play. Toni did three of these playful literacy activities and Kelly did six.

Pretend Play

In pretend play contexts the girls' playful literacy activities involved skills, knowledge of artifacts and social behavior associated with literacy. In this analysis we focus on their knowledge of characteristics of a particular artifact, namely prescriptions.

During pretend play the girls gradually incorporated new information about characteristics of prescriptions into their play behavior. These new behaviors were then consolidated into larger units and repeated

several times. They also voluntarily elaborated upon and extended known information or familiar skills into new contexts.

During the week of data collection one corner was arranged as an animal hospital containing stuffed animals, doctors' props (masks, caps, gloves, needles, stethoscope), x-rays, and a scale.

The examples that we present occurred on the third day we observed at the preschool. On the first two days the girls played in the hospital area but had not included any literacy activites in their pretend play. On the third day at group time, the teacher explictly introduced information about prescriptions by asking the children what a doctor does if an animal needs medicine. She took a small, blank piece of paper and explained the characteristics of prescriptions (it has the symbol "RX" and the name of the medicine needed), the social behaviors associated with prescriptions (the doctor writes the name of the medicine and you take it to the pharmacist), and the functions of prescriptions (to get medicine for sick animals). The teacher showed the children a cardboard tray containing small pieces of paper and some pencils and explained that they should write "RX" and the medicine the animal needs on the prescription. She then placed the paper and pencils in the hospital area and suggested that the adjacent housekeeping area could be the pharmacy.

In non-play settings the usual cycle for using prescriptions occurs when the doctor writes a prescription and gives it to the patient who then gets it filled at a pharmacy. We used this cycle as the unit of analysis (episode) for the girls' play with prescriptions. Kelly's behavior while playing the doctor role illustrates the incorporation and consolidation of new information about characteristics of prescriptions.

When presented with new information about characteristics of prescriptions Kelly first incorporated it orally into her play. Some of this new information she then incorporated into her behavior. She incorporated "RX" early and added writing a number later, and eventually established a pattern of writing "Rx" and the number of days until it was assimilated.

We know from our interview data that Kelly related the prescriptions to her own experience with them because she said she had one once when she was sick and that she had seen the symbol "RX" on her medicine sometimes. We also know from parent interviews and observational data that Kelly could write her own name, some letters and numbers, and made some reversals in her writing.

On the day the teacher discussed prescriptions during group time Kelly chose to begin her play in the hospital area with five other children. The teacher had introduced information about three characteristics of prescriptions: the name, that they contain the symbol "RX," and the names of the kind of medicine. In her first episode Kelly merely labelled the artifact. In the next episode she used the term "prescription" and wrote "RX" on the blank paper. Immediately after that she wrote "XR" (a reversal) on another paper. (She wrote "RX" on the blank prescriptions in all but one of the remaining episodes in which she played the doctor role.) Kelly took the prescription to the aide who was pretending to be the pharmacist. In talking with Kelly, the aide discussed the kind of medicine needed. She also introduced new information about characteristics of prescriptions. She told Kelly the number of times a day to give the medicine and then wrote the number on

the prescription. In later episodes Kelly orally incorporated the information about type of and number of times a day medicine into her play. For example, in the next episode she said to the aide "I need some little pills." In the next two episodes she talked about the number of days an animal should take the medicine (her modification of number of times a day), and also wrote the numbers on the prescription (along with "RX"). After playing the pharmacist role she played doctor again, writing "RX" and a number (for number of days or number of times a day, we assume) on the prescriptions. After again playing pharmacist she returned to playing doctor, again writing "RX" and a number on the prescriptions.

Toni's behavior while playing the doctor role illustrates the voluntary elaboration and extension of known information into new contexts. She seemed to initially incorporate the new information about the "RX" symbol into her play. She also used familiar knowledge (her name) and her interest in spelling in the new context of her pretend play. We know from our interview data that Toni knew little about prescriptions and did not relate them to her experience. In response to the teacher's presentation to the group about prescriptions Toni commented that she did not know how to spell words on a prescription. The teacher told her that was all right and Toni announced that she could write her own name on it. This seemed to be Toni's attempt to relate the characteristics of prescriptions to what she was already familiar with and interested in. Toni could write her name, the letters of the alphabet, familiar names, and some words on her own. She also was interested in spelling and did alot of writing.

Toni's first three episodes were prompted by peers. In her first episode she wrote "KP TONI" on a blank prescription (we assume that "KP" is her interpretation and reversal of RX). In the next episode she wrote "KP TO TONI", elaborating on what she previously wrote. Her next five episodes were self-initiated. First she wrote "BHHL KR", maintaining her interpretation of "RX" reversed and adding other letters. In her subsequent four events she abandoned the "RX" equivalent and wrote letter combinations placed next to each other to resemble a word: "BTRA" in the first, "OOBR" in the second and "MWN" in the third instance.

Non-Pretend Play Contexts

During non-pretend play the girls' playful literacy activities involved information and skills with which they were very familiar, elaborating on known information and skills and extending this information and skills into new contexts. Several examples follow.

Every morning the teacher took attendance after she had brought all the children together into a group. She held up each child's name card for the children to read; after they responded she then read the name aloud. Toni could recognize all but two of the children's names. She generally was very focused and on task while the teacher read the children's names. In fact, she usually was the first child to read aloud each child's name as it was held up. She also often repeated the name after the teacher had read it.

One day Toni elaborated on this pattern by replacing the initial consonant of children's names with another letter. After the teacher read "Katie," Toni said "Watie." After the teacher read the next name, "Scott," Toni said "Bott." She then continued with this pattern, substituting B for the initial letter in the names of six children.

Name reading also provided an opportunity for playful literacy activities for Kelly. Kelly, who had only been attending the preschool for one month, recognized the names of three other classmates besides her own. When these names were held up by the teacher she read them aloud spontaneously. With the remainder of the names she did not focus her attention on the name cards and often looked around the room. Sometimes she repeated the children's names aloud after the teacher and other children had read them.

An instance of playful literacy occurred one day with Alex's name (one of the names she could read). While walking around the room she noticed his name in a story written on an experience chart. She walked over to the chart and said "Alex" as she pointed to his name in the story. She repeated his name again, and then walked over to where Alex was playing and again said his name to herself. Then she returned to the chart, and pointed to his name at the bottom of the story and then in the middle. She looked over the whole chart, looked at the word "Alex" in the middle of the chart again and said playfully, "Alex, Alex, where is Alex?"

Summary and Discussion

Both four-year-old girls we observed engaged in playful literacy activities in pretend and non-pretend play contexts. These literacy activities seemed to involve two functions related to learning: the gradual incorporation of new information into the children's behavior patterns with the formation of larger units behavior, and the elaboration and extension of known or familiar information to new contexts .

The girls themselves had a crucial role in determining the content and function of the playful literacy activities. Their choices seemed to be related to the saliency of the information and their current skills. Activities during pretend play at school are a good example. Both girls were exposed to new information about prescriptions and the social behaviors involved in their use. One girl, who related prescriptions to her environment, chose to incorporate several characteristics of prescriptions into her behavior and to pretend both doctor and pharmacist roles. What she wrote was constrained by her writing skills. The other girl, who knew little about prescriptions, chose only to perform doctor role and to focus her activity not on characteristics of the artifact but on extending her interest in writing and spelling to a new context.

The teachers' explicit introduction of information to the pretend play setting about prescriptions seemed to provide an important stimulus to the girls' incorporation of this information into their pretend play. Neither girl had used pretend prescriptions while playing in the hospital area before the teachers' introduction of the material.

Learning theorists (Anderson, 1982; Piaget, 1962; Simon, 1980) point out that the learner must choose to become involved in incorporating new knowledge and skills into their own frameworks. Playful literacy activities seem to involve the girls' attempts to do just this. However, exploratory studies such as ours which are based on a small number of observations raise questions rather than provide answers. Questions raised by this study include the following. How important are these playful literacy activities to the children's literacy development? What is the role of the specific content in these playful activities? How do

family and cultural attitudes and values about specific functions of literacy influence children's incorporation of them into play? Does children's incorporation of information about literacy artifacts and social behaviors associated with them into their pretend play contribute to their literacy development? How important is the introduction of this type of information by adults?

Detailed naturalistic observations of children's playful literacy activities and their relationship to the children's current knowledge and skills needs to be none of more children of different ages, gender, social class and ethnicity over longer periods of time. Such information would contribute to our understanding of the role and the processes of play that are important to children's literacy development. It would also provide teachers and parents with guidelines for creating environments that maximize children's development.

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